Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

The Influence of Caregiver Depression on Children in Non-relative Foster Care Versus Kinship Care Placements

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ABSTRACT: Little is known about how the challenges faced by caregivers influence the variation in social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) outcomes of youth placed in kinship versus non-relative foster care. This study examined SEB symptoms among youth in kinship and non-relative foster care settings, hypothesizing that changes in caregiver depression would modify children's change in behavior over time. Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) assessments of 199 children placed with kinship and non-relative foster care providers in a Mid-Atlantic city were conducted at time of placement and 6–12 months post-placement. Linear regression estimated CBCL change scores for youth across placement type and caregiver depression trajectories. Kinship caregivers were more likely to become depressed or remained depressed than non-relative foster caregivers. Youth in kinship care always exhibited better change in SEB outcomes than youth in non-relative foster care, but these positive outcomes were principally observed among families where caregivers demonstrated a reduction in depression over time or were never depressed. Adjusted change scores for non-relative foster care youth were always negative, with the most negative scores among youth whose caregivers became depressed over time. Caregiver well-being may modify the influence of placement setting on SEB outcomes for youth placed into out-of-home care. Findings lend to policy relevance for child welfare systems that seek kinship settings as a panacea to the challenges faced by youth, without allocating resources to address caregiver needs.

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